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ABSTRACT

For 4 years, the Alliance for Achievement served as a pioneering effort to raise aspirations and improve the academic preparation of students by connecting public schools and community colleges to each other and the workplace. It proposed the challenging ideas that communities should provide a "seamless path" that carries young people from one level of education to another, and that all students can and should do rigorous work. This overview explains the economic imperative that led to the design of the Alliance. It describes the Alliance model, why it used cross-school teams and why it focused on middle school students. It relates some of the barriers sites faced in achieving Alliance goals, and then highlights outcomes at the six demonstration sites. Local outcomes include strong relationships among middle schools, high schools, and community college; expanded career awareness, career exploration, and educational guidance; and increased parental involvement, more rigorous curriculum, and deeper understanding of the local economy. A "Career Connections" segment involving local business leaders is described. Finally, 12 lessons that have implications for other school-change and school-to-work initiatives are summarized. (EMK)

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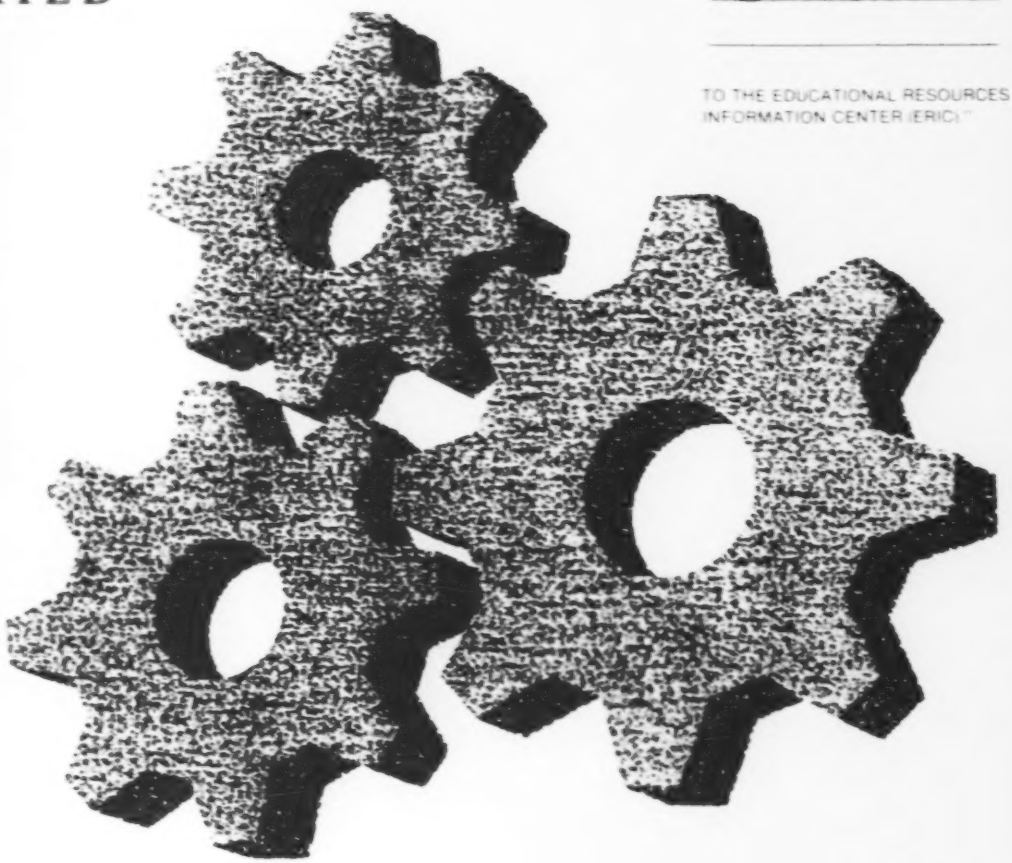

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MDC

MDC works to expand the economy, develop the workforce, and increase per capita income in communities across the country, with a special focus on the South. Established in 1967 to help North Carolina make the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy and from a segregated to an integrated workforce, MDC has spent the last 30 years publishing research and developing programs to strengthen the workforce, foster economic development, and remove the barriers between people and jobs. Since its 1988 publication of *America's Shame, America's Hope*, a study of how the educational reform movement failed at-risk youth, MDC has launched several projects to assistant middle schools high schools, and community colleges with the strategic planning, leadership development, and capacity building they need to increase educational and career options for low-income and minority youth.

The Alliance for Achievement set out in 1992 on a four-year quest to raise the academic achievement, college-going rate, and career opportunities of low-income and minority students in economically distressed communities throughout the South. Funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and BellSouth Foundation, the Alliance launched collaborative "school-to-college-and-career" initiatives in six communities, managed by teams from local middle schools, high schools, and community colleges. Over the life of the project, team members helped forge partnerships among schools and employers on behalf of four objectives: more rigorous curricula, better career education, more parental involvement, and more effective academic and career guidance. The funding of the Alliance program ended in late 1996, but the Alliance-inspired teams and initiatives continue.

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Alliance for Achievement:

Preparing Every Child for College and Career

"And what you've got here is a story about school reform touching children's lives; and how you got there and how it affected the adults along the way is a powerful story."

Gayle Williams, Executive Director
Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
1997 Alliance for Achievement Conference

MDC Inc.
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

April 1997

Preface

"It's a belief system. It's not a program."

David Allen, Assistant Principal
New Hanover High School
Wilmington, NC

For four years, the Alliance for Achievement served as a pioneering effort to raise aspirations and improve the academic preparation of students by connecting public schools and community colleges to each other and to the workplace. It was a multi-dimensional effort that fostered a culture of collaboration among educators and helped guide all students toward academic success, postsecondary education, and rewarding careers.

Viewed from a conventional perception, the Alliance had the look and feel of a "program." There were meetings to attend, grant money to spend, guidelines to follow, and reports to write. Indeed, the Alliance for Achievement was designed to generate model programmatic strategies to:

1. increase the enrollment of minority and low-income middle and high school students in high-level courses and raise their college-going rate;

2. ensure that all middle and high school students develop a clear understanding of the connections among school, college, and career; and

3. forge collaborative ties among middle schools, high schools, community colleges, and local businesses.

While it helped educators take practical steps toward school reform, the Alliance sought also to build a core group of practitioners devoted to shared values -- equity and excellence, aspirations and access -- that could become the foundation for a "culture of high educational expectations" in each participating community.

The Alliance sought to raise young people's awareness of career options and their educational prerequisites, and, in so doing, to encourage more students to continue their education beyond high school. In particular, the Alliance was structured on the premise that community colleges should be an essential partner with middle schools and high schools in a coordinated system to promote postsecondary attainment. Community colleges are accessible and affordable. For most students in rural areas and in lower-income urban neighborhoods, the community college represents a critical pathway -- for some, a stepping-stone to four-year college or university; for many, a source of education and training that leads directly to career opportunities. The Alliance sought to make

young people, as well as their teachers, counselors, and parents, more aware that community colleges teach the intellectual and technical skills required by the new economy.

The Alliance sought to awaken educators to the potency of data on their students' performance and to empower them to raise students' horizons and promote higher achievement at their schools. For parents and business leaders in the participating communities, the Alliance provided a structure for interacting with the schools and community college to promote academic excellence and workplace readiness.

No wonder, then, that David Allen described the Alliance as more a belief system than a program -- a belief system with these tenets:

- that all students can learn at high levels;
- that students who understand the connection between school and work will be more highly motivated in school;
- that teachers and parents must hold high educational expectations for every child, not simply for the so-called best and brightest;
- that a democratic society has an ethical duty and a practical imperative to set high educational standards and to help every young person develop into a productive, responsible, and engaged citizen.

This paper explains the economic imperative that led to the design of the Alliance. It describes the Alliance model, why it used cross-school teams and why it focused on middle school students. It relates some of the barriers sites faced in achieving Alliance goals, and then highlights outcomes at the six demonstration sites. Finally, the paper summarizes lessons from the Alliance that have implications for other school change and school-to-work initiatives.

Unhinging The Economic Trap

"Increasingly in the 21st Century, community colleges are going to be the primary link between the economy and education, between people and jobs."

George B. Autry, President
MDC, Inc.

The foundation for the Alliance project was laid in the report, *Greater Expectations: The South's Workforce is the South's Future*, issued on Labor Day 1992 by MDC, Inc., a Chapel Hill-based nonprofit research and demonstration organization with more than a quarter of a century experience in workforce and economic development issues in the South.

Greater Expectations described an "economic trap" about to snap shut on the South. The region, the report said, would soon be caught between a new economy requiring a higher level of skills on the part of workers and a scarcity of workers prepared to sustain a healthy economy. MDC called for a "a new social contract" in the South and made these recommendations:

- that Southern states place a high priority on technical and community colleges as linchpins of the workforce development system. "The South needs institutions that will aggressively recruit, assess, counsel, educate, and place in jobs or further education those for whom 'college' has been an alien idea and a forbidding institution," said the report.

- that the South's secondary schools be "regeared" to provide a challenging curriculum for those who do not pursue a four-year degree. In particular, the report called for introducing students to the full array of career and postsecondary training options.

- that the South break the grip of cultural bias that channels women and minorities into inferior education and jobs.

MDC developed the Alliance for Achievement in direct response to the *Greater Expectations* recommendations. Through practical education reforms that linked middle schools to high schools and to community colleges, MDC believed, the South could better prepare the future workforce and increase opportunity for young people.

Building Teams -- and a Vision

The Alliance for Achievement was funded by three foundations: the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the BellSouth Foundation. The four-year effort included a year for design, then two years of demonstration, and a final year for embedding the most effective reforms.

From a field of 35 communities where colleges and school systems wanted to develop stronger partnerships, MDC selected six sites for the demonstration. They ranged in size from rural towns and small communities to relatively large cities. Their economies represented declining farming and manufacturing areas, high growth service and tourism economies, and expanding research and technical economies. The six demonstration sites were Stone County in southeast Mississippi; Johns Island, near Charleston, South Carolina; Wilmington, North Carolina; Gainesville, Florida; Birmingham, Alabama; and Louisville, Kentucky.

A critical feature of the Alliance project was the forming of teams to lead the change process. Each site assembled a team of five or six members including teachers, counselors, and administrators from at least one middle school, a high school, and a nearby community college. For many participants, this was a new experience: working together to take responsibility for the continuum of education, not just their own slice of it. Over time, the core teams expanded to add community and business leaders and more educators who together shaped the Alliance's evolution. The ongoing collaboration at Johns Island, says Roberta Frasier, principal of Haut Gap Middle School who served as team leader, has become "like a family affair."

The core teams participated in a series of leadership training seminars to guide them in developing plans for linking schools and the community college. They used MDC's "Moving from Vision to Action" planning process, which stresses reform grounded in data-driven analysis. The teams identified conditions in their schools and colleges that inhibited collaboration and a culture of academic excellence. They developed a five-year vision for change, generated programmatic strategies to advance the vision, and fashioned action and evaluation plans. To carry out the plans, each site received a grant of $25,000, and some sites received additional mini-grants to strengthen connections with local employers.

Participation in the Alliance required each team to analyze current school performance and to set challenging goals for change in the following four areas:

- curriculum enhancement;
- parental involvement;
- guidance and counseling; and
- career awareness.

Based on local circumstances, the teams determined which of these components to emphasize. The teams adopted practices that had proven successful in other schools around the country and they invented new solutions based on their collective wisdom.

Thus, the Alliance for Achievement was not simply about a process of collaboration and cooperation among teachers and administrators. It was about change: change in the priorities and practices of schools, change among educators, and change in the aspirations of students.

Filling a Void In The Middle

"Schools that have strong leadership, a demanding curriculum, and a caring staff absolutely can raise achievement, no doubt about it."

Kati Haycock
The Education Trust
1995 Alliance for Achievement Institute

Businesses often complain that high school graduates are ill-prepared for the workforce, and many high school graduates discover they are equally unprepared for college. But often, decisions made before high school -- in the middle school -- have already set a student on a course toward success or failure.

Early adolescence is when young people begin to form impressions and attitudes about their life prospects. With limited understanding of the impact of their decision, some middle schoolers start closing options for their future -- by avoiding the "hard" classes, mentally or physically dropping out of school, or succumbing to pathologies that throw them off the path of academic achievement. In the South, too many of our children, especially those whose parents never went beyond high school, do not aspire to postsecondary education.

Yet early adolescence is also a time when significant adult intervention can make a difference. The Alliance for Achievement sought to offer a structure in middle school and high school for providing guidance to young people, turning their attention to careers, and showing them the connection between education and the workplace.

At first, the Alliance for Achievement focused on expanding the horizons of minorities and students from low-income families. The initial emphasis was on changing mind-sets on the part of both teachers and students about who could succeed at school or careers.

But the local teams brought about a significant shift in the Alliance emphasis. These educators decided not to limit the target, but rather to focus on <u>all</u> students. As a

result, the Alliance for Achievement may well serve as a model for how to think about middle schools and how to build connections from middle school to high school and to community colleges.

Students Think About Tomorrow

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" When posed by an adult to a young child of, say, six or seven years of age, it is an innocent, harmless inquiry. And the inevitable responses -- policeman, fireman, nurse, astronaut -- are equally innocent and harmless. The brief give-and-take amounts to little more an attempt at polite, if awkward, conversation between non-peers.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" When the same question is posed to an adolescent by a skillful teacher or guidance counselor who comprehends the economy and the career options it holds, the inquiry can become a powerful motivator. The conversation that proceeds from it can lead to opening a mind, broadening a horizon, and building a connection between the classroom and the world beyond. Helping teachers and counselors develop a deeper understanding of the requirements of the modern workplace and of local employment options was a key strategy for improving guidance at the Alliance sites.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" The question lies at the root of the Alliance for Achievement.

Stories from three Alliance sites illustrate how students view their future opportunities.

Marissa Rath, an English teacher at Stone High School in Wiggins, Mississippi, encounters low expectations daily in the eyes and the attitudes of too many of her rural-South students. Here's how she describes, with more than a touch of sadness, how her students think: "Daddy works at the lumber yard. If that's good enough for Daddy, that's good enough for me." Some students put the matter more pointedly, telling her, "My Daddy makes more than you now. Why should I go to college?"

For Wiggins and surrounding Stone County, the timber industry has long held economic dominance. There's a catfish farm on the outskirts of town, and casinos are thriving along the Gulf Coast, 30 miles away. It's a special challenge to motivate teenagers immersed in an economy filled with low-wage, low-skilled jobs, to instill in them an understanding that more education would lead to expanded economic opportunities.

Between Wiggins and the Gulf of Mexico sits the Perkinston campus of Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, the chief passageway to higher education for the 60 percent of Stone High's graduates who enroll in college.

Some of Mrs. Rath's students have high aspirations for college and career, and they recognize their dreams will lead them away from their rural home town.

"I'd like to be a technical engineer," said Brad Solomon, wearing an Atlanta Braves shirt. "I know I'd have to leave."

"I've thought about music therapy, but that's not here in Stone County," said Samantha Breland, and then she went on to explain in her own words the lesson that more Southern young people need to hear: that it takes more than a high school diploma to assure a well-paying job. "Whatever you want to do, you can't do it in high school," she said. "I can't learn here all the music I need to know."

Six hundred and fifty miles to the east, another group of Southern high school students tell of their awakening to the reality that they must go beyond the 12th grade to put themselves on the "up" economic escalator. The conversation takes place at St. John's High, a predominantly black school that is part of the Charleston School District but is located on poor, rural, and economically isolated Johns Island. Parents of these students work on farms, in small shops, or in the resorts of neighboring Kiawah and Seabrook Islands.

"They've seen a struggle," said 12th grader Antoinette Bennett of classmates. "They know what their parents have been through. They want a better life."

"Education is the key to success," said Candice Simmons, a 9th grader. "You won't get far without a good education."

Candice Choice, a junior whose father is a Charleston detective, explains that their school has just added a few accelerated classes in math and English. In the advanced-placement English class, she said, "Our teacher is killing us. It's hard. It's hard." Still, she said, she and her classmates find themselves in a "have-to situation" -- they have to study and succeed, or "if they don't do it, they're going to be stuck here."

Even in Wilmington, NC, with a robust economy and many local career options, the Alliance helped students understand the economic imperative they face. Timbuktu Kassim, a student at Virgo Middle School, put it this way: "It made me realize that you are coming to school for a reason. Without education you can't get a job. Without a job, you can't have any money to support you or if you have a family. So it is like really important to pay attention in every class, because every class has something to do with what you're going to be doing in the future."

Hurdling The Barriers

"To really make change, it takes some time. To change systems, it takes time -- and power."

Pat Martin, Career Development Coordinator
New Hanover High School
Wilmington, NC

The Alliance posed some big challenges to schools. First was the idea that communities should provide a "seamless path" that carries young people from one level of education to the next and into the workforce. Creating this path required blasting away some rock and bulldozing through terrain that has long divided schools from each other and from colleges and employers.

Another core Alliance idea that challenged schools was the conviction that all students can and should do rigorous work. This commitment to excellence and equity demanded new mind-sets in some schools and ran up against political hurdles in some sites.

Creating a seamless path

Before they came together in the Alliance, many of the participating middle schools and high schools hardly spoke to each other, even if they were located within a mile or so of each other. High school teachers blamed the middle schools for freshmen's academic shortcomings, just as middle school teachers blamed the elementary schools. While the middle schools and high schools had very different institutional culture which tended to separate them, some of the separation was simply the result of too little contact between staff. Most public school teachers and administrators had even less contact with the community college -- they were unaware of the scope of the community college's offerings and of career opportunities available with a two-year degree.

An important step in building bridges among these educational institutions was the formation of the Alliance team with members from middle schools, high school, and community college. By meeting intensively to develop a local Alliance plan, they became familiar with each others' schools and began to form personal bonds and a shared commitment to goals. They then put in place strategies to smooth the path for their students. Over three years, the Alliance schools in each site had cemented closer relationships and created the beginnings of a seamless path.

Community colleges were perhaps the most difficult educational partner to involve. For one thing, the institutional dynamics of community colleges are different from those of public schools. "Sometimes I felt like they were in a different business than we were," said Larry Crain, a middle school counselor in Louisville. When

community college enrollments are on the rise, as the experience in Louisville showed, the college has little incentive to expand the pipeline of students coming from local high schools.

Despite the barriers, strong partnerships with community colleges emerged at several Alliance sites. Examples include the summer MAST (Math and Science Technology) Academy developed by Trident Technical College for seventh and eighth graders on Johns Island; the tutoring of Stone County high school and middle school students by Perkinston campus students; and the creation of new scholarships for Birmingham's middle and high school students at Lawson State Community College.

But it is unclear how far these models can spread. Most community colleges serve multiple counties, and as a representative from Trident Technical College in Charleston put it, "We couldn't possibly work this intensively with every middle school in our district." Still, community colleges represent a critical segment of the seamless path and have a responsibility to serve needy students and regions. The Alliance sought to demonstrate on a limited scale what community colleges ultimately should do with all schools in their service area, by connecting them with the "neediest" nearby schools.

Business partnerships are also vital to provide career awareness for students and teachers alike. But most businesses are neither accustomed to nor organized for regular interchanges with schools. For their part, many schools don't know how to reach out to employers or what to ask of them. Alliance schools overcame these barriers with support from district-wide and state school-to-work initiatives. They developed job-shadowing for middle school students, workplace visits and internships for high school students, internships for teachers, and applied learning projects involving adults from local businesses.

Changing mind-sets, dealing with politics

The Alliance impelled school administrators, faculty, and counselors to rethink their assumptions about what students can do. Low expectations among teachers, counselors, or parents, or embedded in the community culture, can stymie students from taking more rigorous courses. Raising expectations is a fundamental precondition to raising student achievement.

To overcome the mind-set hurdle, MDC introduced teams to national experts, took them on a tour of high-performing schools in the New York City area, synthesized some of the best thinking in the field on how to raise student aspirations and achievement, and asked teams to debate and challenge their own views about student achievement and equity. "We didn't realize how we were perpetuating the inequities in our system," said one middle school counselor. "We thought we were doing some students a favor by referring them to less rigorous classes which we thought they could more easily pass; it never occurred to us we were the ones closing down options for these kids because we expected them to fail."

No publicly supported school system is immune to politics, nor should it be. Indeed, political power, wielded skillfully, can be a force for reform. But in different ways in different communities, political developments placed hurdles in front of Alliance teams.

In Wilmington, Alliance members didn't so much jump the hurdle as quietly run around it. As the Alliance was taking shape, the make-up of the New Hanover County school board changed dramatically. The struggle over the county schools caught the attention of the *Washington Post*, which depicted the matter as a fight between two factions of the local Republican Party -- "the traditional wing" and the "new or hard-right wing" -- over whether to abide by a previous desegregation agreement and to sustain a pre-kindergarten program.

While administrative jobs shifted hands and political authorities debated a return to neighborhood schools, the Alliance team sought to avoid entanglements and to maintain its focus. It skillfully built coalitions with community agencies and businesses that shared an interest in improving workforce readiness, and found ways to describe original Alliance goals using the terminology of newly introduced top-down reform mandates. A former principal who moved to the school district office remained supportive. Indeed, the Alliance provided a structure for educators to focus on student aspirations and achievement even as the school district struggled over other, often conflicting policies. One tangible result was the steady rise in minority enrollment at the Alliance high school, where students perceived the environment becoming more welcoming and supportive.

In Gainesville, unfortunately, no such successful ending can be reported. In fact, the Gainesville Alliance formally collapsed after it became entangled in a conflict over ability-grouping in middle school classrooms.

A central element of Gainesville's Alliance project was the elimination of tracking in the participating middle school. The team's goal was to form classes with a range of student abilities so as to spur higher achievement for all. But some parents objected, fearing that the plan would limit opportunities for advanced students. A public controversy erupted, and officials of the Gainesville school district forced the middle school to withdraw from the Alliance. Soon thereafter, the high school and community college officially resigned from the project. Still, the seeds of reform had been planted and unofficial collaboration among the original team members continued.

Local Outcomes

"I can't tell where the Alliance project begins or where it ends. It seems we do everything differently now."

Kathy Kirker, Team Leader
Stone County Middle School
Stone County, Mississippi

The following accomplishments are not exhaustive, but are representative of the outcomes of local Alliance efforts. As the Alliance unfolded, each demonstration site chose which approaches to emphasize depending on local needs, opportunities, and interests.

Strong relationships among middle schools, high schools, and community college

- In Wilmington, North Carolina, team members cite the new relationships among the schools as one of the most successful outcomes of the Alliance, and commented that the Alliance has been used as a model for other community groups that promote collaboration. The Alliance initiated visits to Cape Fear Community College for secondary school teachers, who brought back to the classroom a greater understanding of what the community college has to offer. At the end of the demonstration period, the team was developing an articulation agreement that will give students community college credit for selected courses taken in high school.

- In Stone County, Mississippi, the middle school and high school began conducting joint staff development programs in language arts and coordinating the mathematics curricula at the two schools. The community college launched a "middle school visitation day," where middle school students tour the campus and talk to students and professors, and high school students now can take college-level math courses taught by a community college professor.

- In Louisville, the middle school and high school began "shared curriculum planning," especially in math. Teachers, students, and guidance counselors visit the middle school to tell eighth graders about the neighborhood high school. The schools also planned a teacher exchange program, in which middle school and high school teachers would change places and teach at the other school for several weeks at a time.

- In Birmingham, the community college "adopted" the middle school, the high school, and a neighboring elementary school, offering dual high school and college enrollment, tours of the college, "refresher" courses for parents wishing to become more involved with their children's homework, and enrichment programs for high school students. The college pledged scholarship support to middle school students if

they stay in school and maintain their grades. Prior to the Alliance project, the college had little or no connection with the local schools, despite their location across the street and around the block. Now, as a result of Alliance-inspired outreach activities, the college is gaining popularity among the local high school students as a postsecondary choice.

Expanded career awareness, career exploration, and educational guidance

- Stone County Middle School established a career center to increase career awareness and motivate students to do better in school. Students can make use of five computers with career planning software. All eighth graders now take the ACT Explore achievement test and the Choices interest inventory, and they discuss the results with the guidance counselor. These tests, along with other career center resources, help students complete portfolios and plan their course of study in high school. Stone High School has integrated career exploration into the curriculum for freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. Ninth and tenth graders visit local businesses and prepare classroom presentations on what they learn. These visits were set up initially by the community college tech prep coordinator, a member of the Alliance team. Eleventh graders are required to do a research paper on a particular career, interviewing at least three people working in that field, and describing the career and the preparation required.

- On Johns Island, South Carolina, all eighth graders take a nine-week interdisciplinary unit on careers. During this period, teachers prepare activities related to specific careers; the culmination of the unit is a career day, when adults representing a variety of occupations make presentations to the students. In addition, all eighth graders take the COPS career interest inventory test and complete individual career plans. They meet individually with a career counselor who is housed at the high school and shared by the two schools. After completing career plans, all eighth graders prepare a four-year plan for their high school courses. In addition, middle school students participate in career awareness activities through their Home Arts class for about four weeks out of the year. Student input is solicited in designing this career education program -- the guidance department surveys students to determine which careers they are interested in and to evaluate past programs.

- Sixth and seventh graders at Western Middle School in Louisville participate in a career awareness and exploration class along with academic classes integrating career-related lessons. In addition, students take career interest inventory tests and complete educational/career plans to help them make informed choices about attending the neighborhood high school or one of Louisville's many magnet schools. Eight grade students participate in job-shadowing at a variety of workplaces in the city.

- In Gainesville, the prematurely terminated Alliance demonstration nevertheless led to a strong career education program at the high school. Homeroom teachers function as advisors, working with the same group of students for four years and helping them develop career and academic planning portfolios. All ninth graders take a career interest and aptitude test. They select three job clusters that interest them, and are given information on four-year courses of study for each cluster. In 1995-96, the high school received a school-to-work grant which enabled 30 high school teachers to participate in one-week summer internships in business and industry. Teams of teachers also developed 80 units of applied curriculum in English, math, science, and social studies which emphasize essential skills for the workplace.

Increased parental involvement

A survey of students at Alliance schools found that they rely most heavily on guidance from their parents in selecting high school courses. Siblings were their next most frequent source of advice. This confirmed the importance of informing parents about educational and vocational options for their children. Alliance schools worked with parents in several ways:

- Lawson State, the community college partner in Birmingham, now offers "refresher" courses for parents wishing to become more involved with their children's homework.

- Haut Gap, the middle school partner on Johns Island, involves parents in three ways. First, the school offers monthly parenting classes, held in conjunction with Parent Teacher Student Association meetings. Average attendance is 20-25 parents, with as many as 75 present sometimes. The classes are coordinated by two teachers who bring in speakers and plan activities to help parents become more involved in their children's education. Secondly, parents help lead career awareness activities at the middle school. Each year parents organize a career day at Haut Gap, volunteering to speak about their careers and recruiting friends or coworkers to participate. Speakers are encouraged to stress the link between academic achievement and career opportunities. The third component of parental involvement at Haut Gap is widespread volunteering at the school. The specific tasks parents do is not as important as their exposure to the school and the reassurance that they are needed there, and many return again and again to the school to help in any way they can. Some parents talk to students about their careers; others participate in the school's Guest Readers Program, reading aloud to classes and connecting the readings to career information.

- At Western Middle School in Louisville, parent involvement has increased following a staff development session led by representatives from Sarah Scott Middle School, a school in Terre Haute, Indiana, that was introduced to team members at an Alliance institute. Western Middle now has a parent coordinator and many parents volunteer

at the school. The school also has set aside days for teachers to talk to parents, and parent conferences have increased as a result.

More rigorous curriculum

- Wenonah High School in Birmingham experienced a large increase in Algebra II enrollment and has increased calculus enrollment at the rate of three or four students a year; the school also added an honors chemistry class, economics, and microbiology to the curriculum. Often enrollment in these courses exceeds the official school count of college prep enrollment, indicating that the upgraded curriculum is having an impact throughout the school.

  Changes in curriculum and guidance at Jones Valley Middle School have helped push these curriculum upgrades at the high school. Of the 14 eighth graders who took algebra at Jones Valley during the first year of the Alliance, all but one enrolled in pre-calculus for their junior year at Wenonah. The remaining student enrolled in statistics.

- In 1992 only 43% of students at St. John's High School on Johns Island were in the college prep program. By 1995 the general track had been eliminated, and all students now enroll in college prep or tech prep. The high school offers more advanced placement courses, and more students are taking higher-level courses. In 1995, 22 graduating seniors completed a calculus course, and 35 completed Advanced Placement English. This is a dramatic improvement over 1992, when only 6 seniors were enrolled in calculus and nine in AP English. In 1995-96, for the first time 13 juniors took AP English.

  As in Birmingham, changes at the high school on Johns Island were driven in part by changes at the middle school. Students at Haut Gap Middle School now take more advanced math courses at an earlier age, with pre-algebra starting as early as sixth grade and algebra in seventh or eighth grade. Before the Alliance began, in 1992, about one-quarter of Haut Gap sixth graders and one-fifth of eighth graders were enrolled in remedial math classes. Three years later, all students took either advanced or standard math. Passing rates and test scores attest to the success of the more rigorous math program. Between 1992 and 1995, passing rates rose from 90% to 95%. And in 1994-95, Haut Gap's math test scores were the highest of the 82 middle schools in the Charleston district. The team believes the Alliance raised awareness of Haut Gap's needs at the district level and enabled the school to secure the resources required to offer advanced courses in math and increase student participation in courses such as French.

  To help students adjust to the sharply upgraded curriculum, Haut Gap also initiated a tutoring program, funded with Alliance and district money. Teachers identify students who need extra assistance, and these students gather twice a week after

school. Two teachers and three teaching assistants provide tutoring, aided by computers with tutorial programs. Between 30 and 50 students attend each session. Tutors develop individual education plans for students and assist them with basic skills and weekly homework. Students have been willing to stay after school for tutoring since the program began, and parental support for the program has been high.

- At the start of the Alliance, about 25% of the eighth graders at Western Middle School in Louisville studied algebra, while the rest took a standard math course. By 1995-96, the math program was detracked and all eighth graders now enroll in the same "algebra-type" curriculum, designed to prepare them for algebra and higher math in high school. Sixth and seventh grade students are also grouped heterogeneously in math courses, with some taking part in the Algebra Project (an algebra readiness curriculum). Test results indicate that the more rigorous math program is a success. The number of eighth graders scoring "distinguished" or "proficient" in mathematics on the Kentucky Education Reform Act assessment test has increased from 2% in 1992 to 18% in 1995. The school's overall math achievement index has climbed each year, earning a monetary bonus from the state that is shared among the staff. Furthermore, the more challenging math curriculum has not resulted in a higher failure rate; course failures have remained constant at about 10%.

- In planning its Alliance project, the Stone County team discovered that the middle school math curriculum needed significant upgrading. The school was using a sixth grade textbook designed for remedial classes and test scores were very low, especially among African-American students. Some math teachers were skeptical of students' ability to handle more demanding work. The Alliance sponsored a workshop for math teachers led by Project Prime from Arizona State University, which helped faculty devise ways to support student learning. (The team had been introduced to Project Prime at an Alliance institute.) A first step was to integrate Project Prime's "Algebridge" program into the sixth grade math curriculum; later the entire middle school math program was upgraded. Special tutoring help was added to make sure all students could keep up with the more rigorous curriculum. As a result, most seventh graders now take pre-algebra, and most eighth graders now take either pre-algebra or Algebra I. Standardized math test scores for 1991-92 and 1994-95 show dramatic increases in the number of sixth grade students in the top two quartiles, from 52% to 77% for white students and from 22% to 62% for African-Americans. The percentage of eighth graders in the top two quartiles rose from 49% to 58%.

  There has been a corresponding increase in advanced math enrollment at Stone High School. Between 1991-92 and 1994-95, the number of ninth grade students at Stone High School enrolled in Algebra I increased from 77 to 109, with one ninth grader in Algebra II and 24 in geometry (out of 230 students in the class). And in 1995-96, high school students were able for the first time to enroll in college-level algebra

classes taught by community college professors. Nine students took this dual enrollment class in 1995-96.

Deeper understanding of local economy

Several Alliance sites demonstrated strategies to increase students' and teachers' awareness of the modern workplace and the opportunities for rewarding careers in the region. The most comprehensive was Wilmington's Career Connections program.

Pat Martin, a counselor at New Hanover High School and the leader of the Wilmington Alliance team, provided the initial impetus for Career Connections. She enlisted support from two private sector leaders and secured the endorsement of both the Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Education.

Career Connections had two key elements:

1. An internship during a student's senior year. In the place of one class for one semester, students could work five to ten hours a week in a public agency or private business. Each intern was assigned a mentor at the work site and met weekly with a faculty adviser to discuss progress toward personal goals.

2. A partnership involving schools and employers, created with the assistance of a small Alliance grant. Two corporate representatives, given leave time for community involvement, served as co-chairs of a joint business-education steering committee. Five schools, including elementary, middle, and high schools, and the community college were matched with business partners. The business and school partners met at a daylong workshop to discuss labor-market trends and to plan activities at the schools, including hands-on projects and workplace visits for students.

Ultimately, the Career Connections program was folded into the Cape Fear Partners for Career Success, a school-to-work collaboration involving New Hanover and neighboring Pender County. The two counties joined forces to apply for a grant from North Carolina's school-to-work program. The grant, awarded about the time the small Alliance grant ran out, supported an expanded Career Connections program including six new business-school partnerships. It also resulted in articulation agreements among the middle schools, high schools, and Cape Fear Community College.

Lessons From The Alliance

"And what we've seen across the years at looking at school reform is that every successful intervention looks exactly like this: It has focus, it has policy, it has a set of ways of intervening, it builds a belief system, people get transformed by it, results happen, and it keeps on building on itself."

Wendy Puriefoy, President
Public Education Network
1997 Alliance for Achievement Conference

As a result of both federal and state policies, more and more school districts are becoming engaged in school-to-work activities. Even more schools have attempted school change initiatives designed to elevate student achievement. The Alliance for Achievement, as a pioneering venture into school-to-work territory that also emphasized academic achievement, offers a variety of lessons -- some hard, some small, some challenging, some uplifting for those who would seek to build a seamless path from school to college to careers.

1. Teams work -- Collaboration pays off in setting the stage for institutional change. Interschool teams are an effective vehicle for collaboration, and they also provide a structure that supports change agents seeking to accomplish difficult tasks. Relationships between and among schools permit educators to achieve what they couldn't do alone. And team-led reform provides insurance against the leadership turnover that occurs when administrations change.

2. Local solutions work best -- Visiting successful schools and learning about effective models is inspiring and instructive, yet ultimately each team needs to develop its own unique combination of solutions based on the analysis of its situation and resources. The process of discovering and inventing solutions builds understanding and commitment among team members.

3. Leadership matters -- The most successful Alliance sites had lively teams, but they had something else -- a team leader who doggedly kept the team on track and who made sure that the day-to-day tasks were accomplished. In each team, the leader became a keeper of the flame, the one who persisted in focusing on the values and the goals of the Alliance. There is power in one energetic, committed leader. "You cannot do this work at low intensity," says Lorraine Monroe, former director of New York's Frederick Douglass Academy.

4. Data are powerful tools for driving reform -- "For years we were pleased with ourselves," said Russell Simmons, principal of D.C. Virgo Middle School in Wilmington. "We thought we were doing pretty good. The data collection that you empowered us to do helped us realize that pretty good isn't good enough."

   Data analysis opens eyes -- and changes attitudes. Alliance schools collected data on such matters as course enrollments, grades, suspensions, and standardized test scores, by gender, race, and economic status of students. The collection of data and its forthright analysis against the backdrop of the Alliance's core values of equity and excellence allowed administrators and teachers to see what had gone unseen, to understand who was achieving and who wasn't, to confront issues of race and gender, to discover that more needed to be done, and even to marshall a sense of moral outrage.

   "I have never seen a school system in this country that is not swimming in data," said Gayle Williams, executive director of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, who served on the Alliance's advisory board. As a result, she said, it is important that educators serve as advocates for the collection and dissemination of useful data -- data that are distilled and practical. "Nothing is more powerful to sustain change than hard data," she said.

5. Community partners build bridges -- A team and a leader matter most, but the Alliance experience also points to the importance of nonschool partners. No site shows that more than Johns Island, where Our Lady of Mercy, an ecumenical community center run by a group of Roman Catholic nuns, sanctioned the Alliance and linked it to the community. Our Lady of Mercy provided a neutral-ground meeting facility which helped to eliminate considerations of "turf." Not only did Our Lady of Mercy augment the community involvement aspect of the Alliance, but it also served as a voice of conscience for Alliance values on Johns Island.

6. It takes time, Part 1 -- It takes time to build connections and make them work. Connections between and among middle schools, high schools, and community colleges don't just spring up naturally, and it took most Alliance teams two years to forge solid connections. Seeds of the idea have to be planted and nourished over time. It doesn't take a lot of money to get people inspired to accomplish school reform, but it does require time to build a structure to help them work toward it. The Alliance provided a structure, but in retrospect, even more time was needed to solidify partnerships and institutionalize achievements.

7. It takes time, Part 2 -- Likewise it takes time to build relationships between schools and businesses. Walk into a local bank, insurance agency, or software producer, ask to speak to the coordinator of job-shadowing, and you're likely to be met with a blank stare. Many businesses may want to participate, but it will take some time -- and education -- for businesses to adjust to the demands of expanded internships, job-shadowing, and the other features of school-to-work. Nor do most schools have a job-shadowing coordinator. Indeed, it's up to local school systems to assign the linkage tasks to a capable administrator.

8. Coaxing community colleges -- At the outset, MDC expected that building bridges to community colleges would be an easy part of the Alliance. It wasn't. For one thing, a $25,000 grant to a multi-school collaboration over three years is hardly enough for a community college president to notice. For another thing, community colleges with full enrollment hardly have an incentive to work toward attracting more high school students their way. What's more, the culture of community colleges is far different from that of a local public school system. And yet, success at promoting higher levels of postsecondary attainment for poor students depends upon community college involvement. Community college leaders tend to respond when their institutions can benefit -- for example, by increasing minority enrollment, reducing remediation, assuring a future flow of well-prepared students, or burnishing the college's image in the community.

9. Promote bottom-up reform, but go to the top, too -- The Alliance, with its emphasis on school-rooted teams, took a bottom-up approach to reform. Still, it remains crucial to have support from the top. Some Alliance projects had strong involvement from their school system's central office and the community college's administration; others did not. When there is commitment, support, and deep understanding at the classroom and the boardroom levels as well as in the community, the potential for lasting change is greatest.

   Support for an Alliance-type process from a school principal, from a district superintendent, and from a community college president will provide insulation against roiling political currents, ordinary shifts in administration personnel, and just plain misunderstandings on the part of parents. It is also helpful to enlist the support of community members, especially employers.

10. Expectations, when challenged, change -- It's too early to know whether the Alliance met its ultimate goal of increasing the college-going rate of disadvantaged students. Students who were sixth graders when the Alliance started have not yet finished high school.

Still, the evidence from the MDC evaluations of the Alliance sites suggest that expectations for academic achievement were raised. Students, backed by sensitive guidance counseling and academic support (such as tutoring and study groups), will rise to the challenge when confronted with more rigorous courses -- and they will begin to think more seriously about careers and the connection between school and their life's work. Guidance should be a prominent aspect of any replication or expansion of the Alliance model.

11. Teachers need better information and more exposure to the modern workplace -- To help students point themselves toward higher-level career options, teachers and counselors need information about the regional economy, community colleges and universities, and current and future career options. Too often, such information is not easily available, nor do educators have opportunities to see firsthand what the modern workplace demands.

12. School change involves three dimensions of awareness -- People must first see that change is required, then understand their role in the system and the importance of changing their own behavior, and finally come to believe that their actions can make a difference. MDC's experience in working with teachers, administrators, and counselors shows that, when they honestly assess the performance of their schools, they will work for change. When they remind themselves that every child can succeed academically and that "achievement" should be at the center of the educational enterprise, they respond to the challenges.

So it was heartening, though not surprising, to hear Pat Martin of Wilmington deliver an Alliance valedictory in which she declared that educators have a "moral challenge to expand opportunities for our students." The Alliance, she said, "reminds us of why we got into education in the first place. It brings us home to our purposes."

Afterword

This paper has summarized lessons from the Alliance that have implications for other school-change and school-to-work initiatives. Three additional publications emerging from the Alliance project provide deeper analysis of important aspects of the Alliance model. These include:

- *Walking the Talk: Increasing Educational Options for Southern Youth* -- promotes the creation of a "seamless path" to guide students from middle school through high school to postsecondary education and the workforce. The report synthesizes current thinking about ways to raise student aspirations and expand career opportunities. It describes the fundamental elements required for successful partnerships among middle schools, high schools, community colleges, families, and communities. *Walking the Talk* also describes many programs across the country that raise students' aspirations and academic achievement.

- *I Would Have Taught You Differently: Bringing an Understanding of the Economy Into the Schools* -- describes partnerships among middle schools, high schools, and employers, aimed at raising students' and teachers' awareness of the job market and career opportunities. The report contains a strong rationale for building alliances between schools and employers and features programmatic models of workplace and classroom learning experiences for teachers and students. It also includes case studies that describe the formation and development of three different school-employer partnerships.

- *Building Capacity for School Renewal: Principles of the Alliance for Achievement Model* -- describes the philosophy and practice of leadership development used by MDC to create broad-thinking leaders to drive school reform. It describes nine grounding premises MDC believes are fundamental to successful capacity building and provides an overview of MDC's "Moving from Vision to Action" planning process and the Alliance for Achievement Data Collection Guide.

These publications are available from MDC, Inc. Also available is a videotape titled, *Alliance for Achievement: Preparing Every Child for College and Career.*

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